Main content

Soldiers, statesmen, and scholars have long shared a common conceit: that, given sufficient effort and the right analytical tools, they might one day fully decipher the nature of war. As to where that understanding would lead, though, these groups part company. The soldiers and statesmen imagine bending war to their will and employing military power more effectively. The scholars, in contrast, dream that a full understanding would halt the military miscalculation, slaughter, and pointless destruction that have constituted so much of contemporary history. This impressively researched and highly original but uneven book falls squarely in the latter tradition.

The subject of The Pity of War is World War I, arguably the most pointless and destructive conflict in the bloody century now coming to a close. Rather than offer a grand narrative of the war, Niall Ferguson, who teaches modern history at Oxford University, takes aim at a series of myths that, in his view, have clouded our understanding of the so-called Great War. Above all, he intends to refute the view that the war somehow qualifies as tragedy, its origins, conduct, and outcome the product of vast and uncontrollable forces. He argues instead for seeing it as a series of monumental blunders resulting from the recklessness, stupidity, and cowardice of specific individuals.

Ferguson's self-consciously revisionist book, which stirred a great deal of controversy when it was published in Britain last year, covers a wide range of topics. Revisiting familiar terrain, the author examines the war's origins and probes the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, on which Germany's hopes for quick victory in...